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Spies, lies and defense waste

By William V. Kennedy

Americans tend to think in compartments. Thus in our intently logical pursuit of one objective we often find that we have defeated some other worthy purpose. The latest example is a rush, in the wake of the Walker family spy case, to push for a variety of "spy control" techniques that, once installed, are likely to be a bonanza to those who would like to get the burgeoning defense waste and mismanagement scandal back under the rug.

Americans also have faith in the ability of machines to solve problems. Hence the current effort by the Department of Defense, with the acquiescence of Congress, to install the lie detector as a permanent part of life for all civilian employees of the Pentagon and members of the military service.

The people likely to fail polygraph exams, however, are not the effective liars but conscientious types whose palms perspire and pulse rates jump at the thought of telling the most innocent social obfuscation. These are also the people who, when confronted with incompetence or dishonesty, tend to do something to get it corrected.

Imagination is another proven disability in terms of the polygraph. That is, imaginative people tend to read more into examiners' questions than was intended and so set the needle to jiggling. Thus any conscientious, imaginative person who submits to a lie detector test puts himself or herself in grave jeopardy.

The Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency and the several military "security" [i.e., electronic espionage] agencies affiliated with NSA have been using lie detectors for years to screen prospective employees. A central feature of such examinations is a detailed investigation into the subjects' sexual mores and practices. Interestingly enough, two homosexuals who absconded to the Soviet Union with some of the NSA's most important secrets had passed their successive po-

lygraph examinations with no difficulty whatsoever. Although the government was unable in this as in other matters to cope with the natural or trained liar, the prospect of putting one's thoughts and emotions into a file, to be resurrected who knows when or where, has turned away from government service those who would not sacrifice self-respect for economic and professional expediency.

Now, if we scare away from government service everyone who has a conscience, who is blessed with imagination or who holds a fierce sense of personal integrity and self-respect, whom do we have left? The "team players," that's who, those who will "go along to get along"—in short, people who saw waste and outright fraud and decided that the existing pressures and penalties for whistleblowing were so severe that it was impractical to stick one's neck out.

For all of the billions poured into it since its inception, the CIA's performance has been pedestrian in every respect except the reading of aerial photographs, and most of that is done by military people who at least till now were not required to submit to polygraph examinations. Thus the damage done by the mediocrity induced by the lie detector and other ill-considered security measures far exceeds the damage done by spies who manage to get past the machines quite easily.

The "do something, anything" quick-fix is another unhappy American trait that comes to the fore in embarrassing situations. That Secretary of the Navy John F. Lehman, leader of the effort to authorize unlimited use of the lie detector, is mightily embarrassed by the Walker case is understandable. What is at stake, however, is something more important than ending Lehman's and the Navy's embarrassment.

Abuse of the classification process, sloppy procedures in the handling of material that is properly classified [induced by the overclassification problem] and the sort of recruiting quota pressures that got John A. Walker Jr. into the Navy are some of the major causes of our present security problems. Lie detectors have nothing remotely to do with solving any of those problems. They have a great deal to do with silencing the voices of conscience that finally have begun to emerge in regard to waste, fraud, incompetence and, ultimately, security concerns as well.

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